

The World on the Turtle's Back

Iroquois Creation Myth



READING 2 Analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about genre in different cultural contexts. **2A** Analyze the way in which theme or meaning represents a view on the human condition. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Both the U.S. Constitution and the founding charter of the United Nations are based on ideas found in the Iroquois constitution, known as “The Great Binding Law.”
- Iroquois women had many more rights than colonial American women.
- More than 50,000 Iroquois live in the United States today.

Background



The totem, or tribal symbol, of the Iroquois

“The World on the Turtle’s Back” is an Iroquois (ĩr’ə-kwoi’) creation story filled with conflict and compelling characters. The Iroquois passed down this story from one generation to the next by telling it in elaborate performances. In the 1800s, David Cusick, an Iroquois author, recorded one version of the story in print. Today, more than 25 written versions of the story exist.

The Power of Unity The term *Iroquois* refers to six separate Native American groups—the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, and Tuscarora. Five of these groups—all but the Tuscarora—once resided in what is now New York State. They continually waged war with one another, putting themselves at risk of attack from neighboring Algonquin tribes. Troubled by the bloodshed, a Huron named Deganawidah (də-gä’nə-wē’-də) joined forces with an Onondaga chief named Hiawatha (hĩ’ə-wōth’ə) to end the fighting. Sometime between 1570 and 1600, they formed the Iroquois League,

a confederacy empowered to negotiate treaties with foreign nations and to resolve conflicts among the five nations. In 1722, the Tuscarora, from North Carolina, joined the league. For the next 175 to 200 years, the Iroquois managed to dominate other Native American groups and to remain free of both British and French rule.

The Iroquois Way of Life The league’s effectiveness stemmed in part from the nations’ shared culture. The groups spoke similar languages, held similar beliefs, and followed similar ways of life. They lived in longhouses made of pole frames covered with elm bark, and they built fences around their villages for protection. Up to 50 people occupied each longhouse, and 300 to 600 people lived in each village. Villages were governed by a chief or chiefs, who received advice from a council of adult males. Groups of women gathered wild fruits and nuts and cultivated corn, beans, and squash. In addition to waging war, the men traded, hunted, fished, and built the longhouses.

The Iroquois Through Time During the American Revolution, the Iroquois nations disagreed about whether to support the rebelling colonists or Great Britain. This dispute severely weakened the Iroquois League. Today, the league shows renewed vigor as it fights for environmental protection and increased recognition by the U.S. government.

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● **LITERARY ANALYSIS: CREATION MYTHS**

A **myth** is a traditional story, usually involving supernatural beings or events, that explains how some aspect of human nature or the natural world came to be. A **creation myth** is a specific kind of myth that typically

- describes how the universe, the earth, and life began
- explains the workings of the natural world
- supports and validates social customs and values

These elements of mythic literature might remind you of a science fiction film or novel. Films like *Star Trek* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* often use the traits of creation myths to provide an alternate explanation of how the world was created or destroyed.

● **READING STRATEGY: READING FOLK LITERATURE**

You're probably already familiar with different types of **folk literature**, which includes folk tales, myths, fables, and legends passed orally from one generation to the next. The creation myth you are about to read is another example of folk literature. Using the following strategies as you read will help you not only understand and appreciate the myth's message but also glean information about the culture it comes from:

- Read the myth aloud, or imagine a storyteller's voice as you read silently.
- Note mysteries of nature and details about creation that the myth explains.
- Make inferences about the social values or customs taught through the characters and situations.
- Look for details that reveal other aspects of Iroquois culture.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record your notes and observations about the three kinds of information you find in this myth.

Details About Creation/Nature	Social Values or Customs	Other Cultural Details
Before the earth was created, humans and animals "of the kind that are around us now" did not exist.		

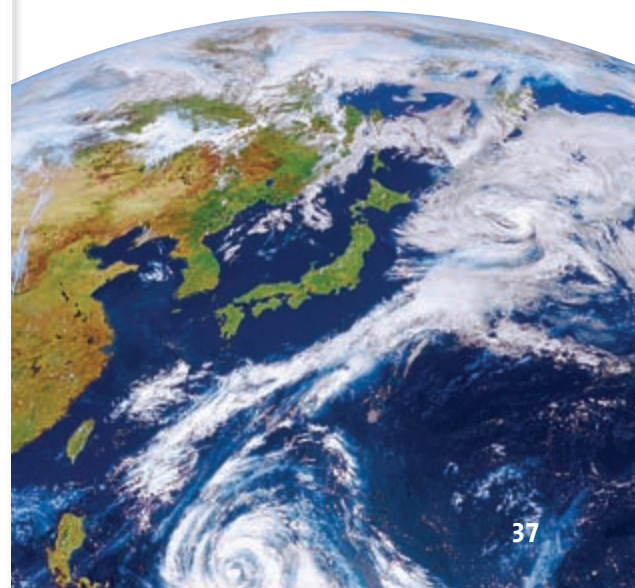
How do we make SENSE of our world?

Since the beginning of time, people of all cultures have gathered to discuss one of life's biggest questions: how was the world created? The Iroquois creation myth you're about to read offers one answer to this question about the origin of the world.

DISCUSS What different accounts of creation—biblical narratives, scientific theories, or stories from other cultures, for example—have you heard or read? With a small group of classmates, summarize as many of these accounts as you know.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.



*The **World** on the **Turtle's Back***

Iroquois

In the beginning there was no world, no land, no creatures of the kind that are around us now, and there were no men. But there was a great ocean which occupied space as far as anyone could see. Above the ocean was a great void of air. And in the air there lived the birds of the sea; in the ocean lived the fish and the creatures of the deep. Far above this unpeopled world, there was a Sky-World. Here lived gods who were like people—like Iroquois.

In the Sky-World there was a man who had a wife, and the wife was expecting a child. The woman became hungry for all kinds of strange delicacies, as women do when they are with child. She kept her husband busy almost to distraction finding
10 delicious things for her to eat.

In the middle of the Sky-World there grew a Great Tree which was not like any of the trees that we know. It was tremendous; it had grown there forever. It had enormous roots that spread out from the floor of the Sky-World. And on its branches there were many different kinds of leaves and different kinds of fruits and flowers. The tree was not supposed to be marked or mutilated by any of the beings who dwelt in the Sky-World. It was a sacred tree that stood at the center of the universe. **A**

The woman decided that she wanted some bark from one of the roots of the Great Tree—perhaps as a food or as a medicine, we don't know. She told her husband this.
20 He didn't like the idea. He knew it was wrong. But she insisted, and he gave in. So he dug a hole among the roots of this great sky tree, and he bared some of its roots. But the floor of the Sky-World wasn't very thick, and he broke a hole through it. He was terrified, for he had never expected to find empty space underneath the world.

Analyze Visuals ►

Examine the painting on page 39. How does the artist use light and color to emphasize the division between the Sky-World and the void below it?

A CREATION MYTHS

So far, how is this myth similar to and different from other accounts of creation you've heard or read? Explain your answer, citing details.

Sky Woman (1936), Ernest Smith.
Courtesy of the Rochester Museum and
Science Center, Rochester, New York.



But his wife was filled with curiosity. He wouldn't get any of the roots for her, so she set out to do it herself. She bent over and she looked down, and she saw the ocean far below. She leaned down and stuck her head through the hole and looked all around. No one knows just what happened next. Some say she slipped. Some say that her husband, fed up with all the demands she had made on him, pushed her.

So she fell through the hole. As she fell, she frantically grabbed at its edges, but
30 her hands slipped. However, between her fingers there clung bits of things that were growing on the floor of the Sky-World and bits of the root tips of the Great Tree. And so she began to fall toward the great ocean far below.

The birds of the sea saw the woman falling, and they immediately consulted with each other as to what they could do to help her. Flying wingtip to wingtip they made a great feathery raft in the sky to support her, and thus they broke her fall. But of course it was not possible for them to carry the woman very long. Some of the other birds of the sky flew down to the surface of the ocean and called up the ocean creatures to see what they could do to help. The great sea turtle came and agreed to receive her on his back. The birds placed her gently
40 on the shell of the turtle, and now the turtle floated about on the huge ocean with the woman safely on his back.

The beings up in the Sky-World paid no attention to this. They knew what was happening, but they chose to ignore it.

When the woman recovered from her shock and terror, she looked around her. All that she could see were the birds and the sea creatures and the sky and the ocean.

And the woman said to herself that she would die. But the creatures of the sea came to her and said that they would try to help her and asked her what they could do. She told them that if they could find some soil, she could plant the roots stuck between her fingers, and from them plants would grow. The sea
50 animals said perhaps there was dirt at the bottom of the ocean, but no one had ever been down there so they could not be sure.

If there was dirt at the bottom of the ocean, it was far, far below the surface in the cold deeps. But the animals said they would try to get some. One by one the diving birds and animals tried and failed. They went to the limits of their endurance, but they could not get to the bottom of the ocean. Finally, the muskrat said he would try. He dived and disappeared. All the creatures waited, holding their breath, but he did not return. After a long time, his little body floated up to the surface of the ocean, a tiny crumb of earth clutched in his paw. He seemed to be dead. They pulled him up on the turtle's back and they sang and prayed
60 over him and breathed air into his mouth, and finally, he stirred. Thus it was the muskrat, the Earth-Diver, who brought from the bottom of the ocean the soil from which the earth was to grow. **B**

The woman took the tiny clod of dirt and placed it on the middle of the great sea turtle's back. Then the woman began to walk in a circle around it, moving in the direction that the sun goes. The earth began to grow. When the earth was big

Language Coach

Meanings of idioms.

"Fed up with" in line 28 is an idiom, an expression that means something different than the literal meaning of the words. "Fed up with" means "wearied or tired of" (to the point of losing patience or control). Use this idiom to explain in your own words why the husband may have pushed his wife.

B FOLK LITERATURE

Reread lines 46–62 and consider the role that "all the creatures" play in this myth. What does this suggest about the Iroquois' attitude toward animals?

enough, she planted the roots she had clutched between her fingers when she fell from the Sky-World. Thus the plants grew on the earth.

To keep the earth growing, the woman walked as the sun goes, moving in the direction that the people still move in the dance rituals. She gathered roots and
70 plants to eat and built herself a little hut. After a while, the woman's time came, and she was delivered of a daughter. The woman and her daughter kept walking in a circle around the earth, so that the earth and plants would continue to grow. They lived on the plants and roots they gathered. The girl grew up with her mother, cut off forever from the Sky-World above, knowing only the birds and the creatures of the sea, seeing no other beings like herself.

One day, when the girl had grown to womanhood, a man appeared. No one knows for sure who this man was. He had something to do with the gods above. Perhaps he was the West Wind. As the girl looked at him, she was filled with terror, and amazement, and warmth, and she fainted dead away. As she lay on the ground,
80 the man reached into his quiver, and he took out two arrows, one sharp and one blunt, and he laid them across the body of the girl, and quietly went away.

When the girl awoke from her faint, she and her mother continued to walk around the earth. After a while, they knew that the girl was to bear a child. They did not know it, but the girl was to bear twins.

Within the girl's body, the twins began to argue and quarrel with one another. There could be no peace between them. As the time approached for them to be born, the twins fought about their birth. The right-handed twin wanted to be born in the normal way, as all children are born. But the left-handed twin said no. He said he saw light in another direction, and said he would be born that
90 way. The right-handed twin beseeched him not to, saying that he would kill their mother. But the left-handed twin was stubborn. He went in the direction where he saw light. But he could not be born through his mother's mouth or her nose. He was born through her left armpit, and killed her. And meanwhile, the right-handed twin was born in the normal way, as all children are born. ©

The twins met in the world outside, and the right-handed twin accused his brother of murdering their mother. But the grandmother told them to stop their quarreling. They buried their mother. And from her grave grew the plants which the people still use. From her head grew the corn, the beans, and the squash—"our supporters, the three sisters."¹ And from her heart grew the sacred tobacco, which
100 the people still use in the ceremonies and by whose upward-floating smoke they send thanks. The women call her "our mother," and they dance and sing in the rituals so that the corn, the beans, and the squash may grow to feed the people.

But the conflict of the twins did not end at the grave of their mother. And, strangely enough, the grandmother favored the left-handed twin.

The right-handed twin was angry, and he grew more angry as he thought how his brother had killed their mother. The right-handed twin was the one who did everything just as he should. He said what he meant, and he meant what he said.

1. **the three sisters:** Corn, beans, and squash—the Iroquois' staple food crops—were grown together. The bean vines climbed and were supported by the corn stalks; squash, which spread across the ground and kept weeds from growing, was planted around the bean plants.



TEKS 2B

© CREATION MYTHS

Mythic stories often include the miraculous birth of a child. In the *Star Wars* movies, the hero Luke Skywalker and his twin sister Leia are born when their mother dies during childbirth. The miraculous birth of the *Star Wars* twins is kept a secret from others in the story, but the Iroquois rely on this element of the text structure to show how their world was created. What else might the birth of the twins represent here?

He always told the truth, and he always tried to accomplish what seemed to be right and reasonable. The left-handed twin never said what he meant or meant
110 what he said. He always lied, and he always did things backward. You could never tell what he was trying to do because he always made it look as if he were doing the opposite. He was the devious one. **D**

These two brothers, as they grew up, represented two ways of the world which are in all people. The Indians did not call these the right and the wrong. They called them the straight mind and the crooked mind, the upright man and the devious man, the right and the left.

The twins had creative powers. They took clay and modeled it into animals, and they gave these animals life. And in this they contended with one another. The right-handed twin made the deer, and the left-handed twin made the
120 mountain lion which kills the deer. But the right-handed twin knew there would always be more deer than mountain lions. And he made another animal. He made the ground squirrel. The left-handed twin saw that the mountain lion could not get to the ground squirrel, who digs a hole, so he made the weasel. And although the weasel can go into the ground squirrel's hole and kill him, there are lots of ground squirrels and not so many weasels. Next the right-handed twin decided he would make an animal that the weasel could not kill, so he made the porcupine. But the left-handed twin made the bear, who flips the porcupine over on his back and tears out his belly.

And the right-handed twin made berries and fruits of other kinds for his
130 creatures to live on. The left-handed twin made briars and poison ivy, and the poisonous plants like the baneberry and the dogberry, and the suicide root with which people kill themselves when they go out of their minds. And the left-handed twin made medicines, for good and for evil, for doctoring and for witchcraft.

And finally, the right-handed twin made man. The people do not know just how much the left-handed twin had to do with making man. Man was made of clay, like pottery, and baked in the fire. . . .

The world the twins made was a balanced and orderly world, and this was good. The plant-eating animals created by the right-handed twin would eat up all the vegetation if their number was not kept down by the meat-eating animals,
140 which the left-handed twin created. But if these carnivorous animals ate too many other animals, then they would starve, for they would run out of meat. So the right- and the left-handed twins built balance into the world.

As the twins became men full grown, they still contested with one another. No one had won, and no one had lost. And they knew that the conflict was becoming sharper and sharper, and one of them would have to vanquish the other.

And so they came to the duel. They started with gambling. They took a wooden bowl, and in it they put wild plum pits. One side of the pits was burned black, and by tossing the pits in the bowl and betting on how these would fall, they gambled against one another, as the people still do in the New Year's

D FOLK LITERATURE

Reread lines 95–112.

Which twin is characterized as being more admirable? What does this characterization tell you about Iroquois values?

Language Coach

Word Definitions

Look at the word *doctoring* in line 133. Many people know the term *doctor*, but *doctoring* or *to doctor* might be unfamiliar. *Doctoring* here means “healing.” What clues from the text help you guess the meaning of *doctoring*?



TEKS 2B

THEME AND GENRE: TEXT STRUCTURE

In the Iroquois myth, the twins demonstrate their special powers soon after their birth. This is a particular feature of the text structure of *Miraculous Birth* stories. For example, in *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker also has special powers. However, in an adaptation of the mythic structure that is utilized in *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker must develop his powers and hone his skills through the assistance of a mentoring figure, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Can you think of other twentieth-century superheroes who hone their skills with the help of a mentor?



Detail of *Sky Woman* (1936), Ernest Smith. Courtesy of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York.

150 rites.² All through the morning they gambled at this game, and all through the afternoon, and the sun went down. And when the sun went down, the game was done, and neither one had won.

So they went on to battle one another at the lacrosse³ game. And they contested all day, and the sun went down, and the game was done. And neither had won.

And now they battled with clubs, and they fought all day, and the sun went down, and the fight was done. But neither had won. **E**

And they went from one duel to another to see which one would succumb. Each one knew in his deepest mind that there was something, somewhere, that would vanquish the other. But what was it? Where to find it?

160 Each knew somewhere in his mind what it was that was his own weak point. They talked about this as they contested in these duels, day after day, and somehow the deep mind of each entered into the other. And the deep mind of the right-handed twin lied to his brother, and the deep mind of the left-handed twin told the truth.

On the last day of the duel, as they stood, they at last knew how the right-handed twin was to kill his brother. Each selected his weapon. The left-handed twin chose a mere stick that would do him no good. But the right-handed twin

E FOLK LITERATURE

Reread lines 146–156. Note in your chart the information about Iroquois customs and rituals you learn from these lines.

2. **New Year's rites:** various ceremonies to get ready for the New Year. They often included community confession of sins, the replenishing of hearths in the homes, and sacred dances, as well as the gambling ritual.

3. **lacrosse:** a game of Native American origin wherein participants on two teams use long-handled sticks with webbed pouches to maneuver a ball into the opposing team's goal.

picked out the deer antler, and with one touch he destroyed his brother. And the left-handed twin died, but he died and he didn't die. The right-handed twin
170 picked up the body and cast it off the edge of the earth. And some place below the world, the left-handed twin still lives and reigns.

When the sun rises from the east and travels in a huge arc along the sky dome, which rests like a great upside-down cup on the saucer of the earth, the people are in the daylight realm of the right-handed twin. But when the sun slips down in the west at nightfall and the dome lifts to let it escape at the western rim, the people are again in the domain of the left-handed twin—the fearful realm of night.


Having killed his brother, the right-handed twin returned home to his grandmother. And she met him in anger. She threw the food out of the cabin onto the ground and said that he was a murderer, for he had killed his brother. He grew
180 angry and told her she had always helped his brother, who had killed their mother. In his anger, he grabbed her by the throat and cut her head off. Her body he threw into the ocean, and her head, into the sky. There, “Our Grandmother, the Moon” still keeps watch at night over the realm of her favorite grandson. **F**

The right-handed twin has many names. One of them is Sapling. It means smooth, young, green and fresh and innocent, straightforward, straight-growing, soft and pliable, teachable and trainable. These are the old ways of describing him. But since he has gone away, he has other names. He is called “He Holds Up the Skies,” “Master of Life,” and “Great Creator.”

The left-handed twin also has many names. One of them is Flint. He is called
190 the devious one, the one covered with boils. Old Warty. He is stubborn. He is thought of as being dark in color.

These two beings rule the world and keep an eye on the affairs of men. The right-handed twin, the Master of Life, lives in the Sky-World. He is content with the world he helped to create and with his favorite creatures, the humans. The scent of sacred tobacco rising from the earth comes gloriously to his nostrils.

In the world below lives the left-handed twin. He knows the world of men, and he finds contentment in it. He hears the sounds of warfare and torture, and he finds them good.

In the daytime, the people have rituals which honor the right-handed twin.
200 Through the daytime rituals, they thank the Master of Life. In the nighttime, the people dance and sing for the left-handed twin. 

F CREATION MYTHS

The transformation of a character is a common element of mythology, often used to explain natural phenomena. Consider the natural feature explained in lines 172–183. How does this myth explain the fact that the moon is visible mainly at night?



TEKS 2B

THEME AND GENRE

The right-handed twin is also called “the Master of Life.” Many works of mythic literature are built around the idea of a good hero overcoming obstacles and eventually achieving a reward. The 2001 film *Shrek* uses some of the elements of mythic literature to illustrate the struggle of a character who must overcome the problems of an ogre to gain his reward. How would you relate the idea of a good hero who overcomes obstacles to a recent film you’ve seen?

Comprehension

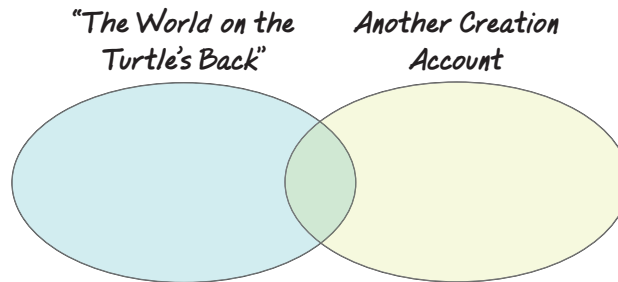
1. **Recall** How do the animals help the woman who fell from the sky?
2. **Recall** What roles do the grandmother and her daughter play in the earth's creation?
3. **Summarize** What is the outcome of the battles between the twins?



READING 2 Analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about genre in different cultural contexts. **2A** Analyze the way in which theme or meaning represents a view on the human condition. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text.

Literary Analysis

4. **Compare and Contrast** How does this myth compare with the accounts of the world's origin you summarized before you read? Use a Venn diagram to record the differences and similarities between "The World on the Turtle's Back" and one of the accounts you discussed.



5. **Analyze a Creation Myth** Reread lines 105–112. Summarize the differences between the right-handed twin and the left-handed twin. Why do you think the Iroquois honor both twins? What elements of human nature are explained by "The World on the Turtle's Back"?
6. **Draw Conclusions from Folk Literature** Folk literature often transmits information about a people's culture and way of life. Review the details you noted in your chart as you read. From this myth, what did you learn about the Iroquois'
 - attitude toward nature?
 - view of their gods?
 - important food, games, and rituals?
 - beliefs about good and evil?

Literary Criticism

7. **Critical Interpretations** Creation stories often serve many purposes. According to Larry Evers and Paul Pavich, scholars of Native American literature, such stories "remind the people of who and what they are, why they are in this particular place, and how they should continue to live here." Do you think that "The World on the Turtle's Back" fulfills these functions? Explain, citing evidence from the text to support your interpretation.

*How do we make **SENSE** of our world?*

How did the Iroquois make sense of their surroundings? Why might this story have been important to them?